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ABSTRACT

"Chance Dance" is a success-oriented learning technique which gives students an opportunity to explore a word or a concept through oral expression, dance, and creative writing. This is done by first eliciting from the group all possible verbal associations for a selected word or concept and then, in smaller groups, choreographing some of these verbal associations for presentation within a dance sequence for the whole group. The dance sequence is followed by an in-depth discussion, a creative writing opportunity, and sharing of the individual's writing with the whole group. (JM)

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An Experience in Language and Dance

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Serious students of early childhood education have long been convinced of the educational value in movement experiences - in dance. Research has justified their conviction and has demonstrated scientifically that learning does occur through such activity. Further, such activity can add a humanizing dimension to the learning experience. These benefits do not accrue to the young exclusively. Indeed, research suggests that all learners can profit from movement experiences. Among other things, it has been found that movement experiences can:

1. encourage better communication among people,
2. provide opportunities for cognitive development,
3. aid in self-expression and creativity,
4. help to clarify feelings and ideas, and
5. assist in understanding reality.[1]

Such conviction served as a basis upon which the strategy called, "Chance Dance" was designed.

Initially, "Chance Dance" was planned as an experience in movement alone. However, after some experimentation with the idea using both student and adult groups, it became clear that the experience was considerably enhanced when appropriate language activities were included in the design. Hence, "Chance Dance" evolved as an experience in language and dance.

The basic objective in "Chance Dance" is to provide an opportunity to explore a word or a concept through oral expression, dance, and creative writing. Brainstorming is used to elicit all possible verbal associations for a selected word or concept. The recorded verbal associations are used by small groups as an aid in choreographing a dance sequence that would reflect some aspect of the word or concept. The dance sequence is then presented to the whole group. It is followed by an in-depth discussion and a creative writing opportunity. The basic design, step-by-step, is as follows:

1. Identify the word or the concept.
2. Brainstorm for all possible associations.
3. Record all responses on a chalkboard or chart paper.
4. Organize into smaller groups for the purpose of choreographing a dance sequence.

5. Allow each group to present its dance sequence to the larger group.
6. Lead a whole-group discussion (after all dance sequences are presented) to identify the associations for the word or concept that each group was attempting to portray.
7. Guide a whole-group creative writing activity.
8. Invite participants to use the pattern developed above (number 7) for writing their own compositions.
9. Encourage oral sharing of the creative writing product by inviting volunteers to read their creations to the whole group.

This procedure works best when ample time is allowed for brainstorming, for planning and practicing the dance sequences, and for creative writing. Such efforts take time.

As noted in step one, the process begins once the word or concept is identified. The teacher initiates the activity simply by saying, "What do you think of when I say _____?" At this point the word or concept should be written in large letters on a chalkboard or on chart paper. The entire group is now encouraged to brainstorm for all possible associations for the word or concept. All responses are recorded on the chalkboard or chart paper. The brainstorming may be skewed in one direction, e.g.

only positive associations may be requested. However, when both positive and negative responses are made, the teacher may list them in mixed order as they are received, or, the positive and negative responses may be listed in separate columns. With a group of teachers brainstorming the word, TEACHER, the following list was elicited:

facilitator	appreciative	idealist
school-oriented	mediator	professional
stern	frustrated	baby-sitter
dedicated	unappreciated	fun
rule-maker	unfair	compulsive
disciplinarian	loud-mouth	realist
umpire	funny	paternal
understanding	referee	maternal
therapist	friend	omnipotent
rule-follower	guide	omniscient
catalyst	optimist	omnipresent
tired	pessimist	appreciated
underpaid	counselor	synthesizer
ham	enthusiastic	loving
educator	warm	overworked
supportive	model	giver
		paper-checker

The brainstorming took less than five minutes and it not only involved quite a bit of languaging but encouraged

interaction among the participants and set a good psychological tone for the activities that followed.

When the brainstorming phase has run its course, the participants are then prepared for small group activity. Using the number of different letters in the word or concept, the whole group is divided into that many groups, e.g. with the word, TEACHER, there are six different letters- the letter "E" is counted only once. The whole group is therefore divided into six groups. In a classroom of thirty, there would be six groups of five participants in each group. In a classroom of thirty-two, there would be four groups of five participants each and two groups of six participants each. Each group is assigned a letter to represent. Once the dance sequences are choreographed and practiced, the presentation is done in the order of the letters in the word or the concept under consideration. This relieves the teacher of the responsibility of deciding who should present first, second, third, etc. It should be noted here also, that a group which is assigned a letter that appears more than once in a word, presents the same dance sequence every time the letter appears in the word. So, in the word, TEACHER, the group assigned the letter "E" performed second and sixth in the final presentation.

Once the total group is divided into smaller units, the task for each group is identified. The task for each

small group is to select from the word association list, any word which they would like to portray in dance. For example, a small group may decide to portray in dance the word "guide" to represent the concept, TEACHER. They do not disclose their selection to anyone. This will be important in the discussion segment of "Chance Dance." The group then discusses the kinds of movements that would best convey the message of the word they selected. Different movements should be planned, tested, discarded, accepted, or changed, until a final decision is made. The participants then practice and refine the dance sequence upon which they have mutually agreed.

Once the task is clarified, the teacher then identifies various areas in the class, hallway, spare rooms, etc. for the small groups to convene, begin their discussion, and practice their dance sequences. The teacher's role at this point requires moving from group to group to help with group dynamics, to clarify the task further, or to encourage forward movement. Allowing ample time for practicing the dance sequence will be very important. As the teacher moves from group to group, the amount of time needed will be clear. A polished performance with good timing gives students a sense of achievement, lends dignity to their work, and commands the respect of others.

The next phase, step five, is the presentation of all dance sequences. The entire group is reconvened. Furniture is arranged to provide sufficient space for performers

and good viewing for the audience. The teacher can serve as announcer and introduce the key word, e.g. TEACHER, again. The dance sequences are now presented in the order of the letters in the word. When using the word, TEACHER, the series of presentations would be as follows:

T = first presenters

E = second presenters

A = third presenters

C = fourth presenters

H = fifth presenters

E = sixth presenters (same group and same dance as for E, earlier)

R = seventh presenters

Because timing improves with subsequent runs, groups are encouraged to repeat their performance. Students receive more and more satisfaction from the dance experience as their timing improves and there is a very real sense of team effort as the presentation moves towards more and more sophistication.

Following the presentation, the whole group is led into a discussion of what was viewed. Good opening questions are:

Can you guess which words the dance sequences were trying to portray?

Did the dance sequences reflect any of the words we brainstormed for earlier?

Of course, it will be important for the small groups to keep their word selections a secret during the entire discussion. This will set optimal conditions for speculation, verification, and critical thinking in general. It is in such a setting of free discussion that concepts are clarified. In one group, a good, in-depth discussion evolved when a particular dance sequence was identified variously as representing the words: judge, mediator, and counselor. When the discussion was complete, the differences among these words were quite clear. A useful technique for the discussion leader, at this point, was to repeat a position as it was articulated, ask for the gestures or movements which suggested it, ask if others felt the same or differently and then repeat the process. It will be important for the teacher to see to it that each dance sequence is discussed so that no group's presentation is ignored. Once all sequences are discussed, the teacher asks each group to reveal the word they were trying to portray. In cases where the connection is not clear, the group is asked to explain which movements represented the idea. This discussion is beneficial however, even when the connection is clear. It provides input for the next attempt at "Chance Dance."

From such a discussion and dance experience, the writing opportunity in steps seven and eight develops. The writing can be in any form which seems appropriate to the topic:

paragraphs, blank verse, pattern poems, slogans, etc. With several groups where the word, TEACHER, was used, a pattern poem was written with the entire group. On the chalkboard, the following pattern appeared:

What is a teacher?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

That's a teacher!

The pattern is based on one used by James A. Smith with students. [2] The entire group is asked to review the word associations on the board and to reflect on the dance sequences and the in-depth discussion. On the basis of such reflection, the group was encouraged to contribute phrases that would be approximately as long as the blank lines indicated and which would answer the lead question. The result is interesting, simple, blank verse, e.g.

What is a teacher?

a concerned friend
one who guides learning
an interested listener
one who stimulates thought
a worthy model

That's a teacher!

Following the group experience, students are asked to use the same method and the same pattern to write their own blank verse independently or in pairs. To complete the writing experience, volunteers are called upon to read their creations to the entire group. The resulting blank verse can also be collected, typed, and duplicated for distribution to the entire group.

"Chance Dance" is fun. It is a total experience in learning. It is success-oriented and has the potential for building good group interaction and better human relations. In "Chance Dance" every individual counts; every individual contributes out of his personal resources to the group effort. Language skills and problem solving techniques are honed. The importance of dance and non-verbal communication is recognized. Why not take a chance on "Chance Dance" and see for yourself!

1. Andrews, Gladys; Saurborn, Jeanette; and Schneider, Elsa. Physical Education for Today's Boys and Girls. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc. 1960.
2. Smith, James A. Creative Teaching of the Creative Arts in the Elementary School, 2nd edition. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc. 1974.